

Max Mueller — What can he Teach us ?

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For a modern western indologist it is not at all easy to explain the far-reaching influence of Max Mueller and his works in Europe during his life-time and his undiminished fame in India even in modern times. It is surely no secret that western students of indology, as a rule, do not know more about him than that he has been the first to print the Rigveda, or that he has lived in England and written in English. As respects his books, however, few will have read more than the titles, and to people outside the sphere of oriental studies his name will not mean anything at all. On the other hand, it is again and again impressing to travellers in India to hear his name from the lips of even uneducated people and to find a living memory of him and a real cult of his person in all parts of India. Especially this last-mentioned fact must be puzzling to the historian, who can readily understand that a scholar highly celebrated in his time, is paid too little attention a hundred years afterwards. What he, nevertheless, finds difficult to believe, is that out of pure inertia an entire people can be true to an idol once chosen, assuming even that a good deal of the Indian adorers of Max Mueller have not read a single line of his books and that traditional routine may be strong in India—also in recently-founded cults. To delve into the real causes for this seems to me a good starting point for an investigation of this remarkable man.

For a better understanding of a man of the past we are used to look first into the historical setting, to the place where and to the time when he lived. We do this, although we are aware that external circumstances never can explain the secret of a great man's life, his interests and the growth of his personality. Despite this fact, they can show us what means were at his disposal for communicating his personal intuition to his contemporaries, or else, how he was impeded to do this by the limitations of his cultural environment and his education and later career. This is a point, I think, to be kept in mind especially when considering a personality like Max Mueller.

Max Mueller occupies an intermediate position regarding both the place and the time of his life. He was German by birth

and received the whole of his education in Germany, but he settled in England in the second half of his life and became a naturalized citizen there. He was among the last scholars to get his training from the romantic school of indology, but he was a contemporary of the great German indologists of the second half of the 19th century whose basic conceptions have, on the whole, remained the same up to our time. As a result he had to miss something of what might be called the results of a "regular" development, yet he also gained or rather preserved much that was no longer shared by his colleagues.

Turning first to his migration from Germany to England it must be stated, that, at that time, the difference between English and German indology was much more marked than in the traditional disciplines of Western university. England had not been given the leisure to form an idealised romantic image of India as was done by German philosophers and poets. The interests of the British residents in India in Indian culture had, if at all, grown out of the practice of daily life. Thus, we can easily surmise their quite natural suspicion towards a foreigner, who never had set foot on Indian soil and attempted to persuade them in a passionate manner, that Indians were far better than they had been told by so many of their countrymen, as he did in his famous lectures for the candidates of the Indian Civil Service, printed later under the title, *India—What Can It Teach Us?* He had a brilliant career and was highly honoured in the land of his choice, but his deeply rooted belief in the value of written documents and printed books common to Germans and philologists, his preaching that spiritual values are superior to worldly gains, his outspoken criticism of the British colonial rule and many other things could not but have prevented him from becoming completely assimilated into the English culture of the Victorian era. Nor could he, on the other hand, after living so many years away from his native country, have remained as the Germans of his time. He was criticised by his German colleagues for adopting English habits, e.g. publishing scholarly articles in prominent newspapers instead of in special philological periodicals, and for his loose contact with progress in contemporary German indology and linguistics. Now we may leave it to others to decide if it was detrimental to his development, that he did not bow his head to the rigid sound-laws established by the Neogrammarian school and went on comparing Greek *theos* to Sanskrit *deva* and Latin *deus* genetically, and risked his reputation as a serious scholar in Germany by sometimes using a

popular style full of repetitions in order to make his ideas accessible to a broader public. What we may say with certainty, is that his distance from his native place meant an advantage for his political thought. With a natural, inborn affinity for the great liberal tradition of England he disdained the growing nationalism of the Kaiserreich and, at the same time, he supported a close friendship and co-operation between the two countries. Max Mueller's stand between the two nations was, on the whole, clearly a gain for him.

Nevertheless, nobody can change his dwelling place without also changing, so to speak, his time. We observe among political emigrants a desperate striving for understanding in their new country, a present not familiar to them, and a clinging to a past time, which they think has remained unchanged, after their leaving the home of their youth. In a less tragic, much more subtle way, this can also be seen in the person of Max Mueller. The decisive experience of his college days was the romantic school of indology. But before tracing its influence upon him throughout his later life, it is first necessary to insert a short remark upon what "romantic" means with regard to indology. In our country the term has found ample usage among a certain faction of indologists, who wanted to modernise their methods and look upon the indology of the beginning of the 19th century as something, which had long since passed, but whose fatal though unconscious influence was still to be felt in many branches of their discipline. Proud of their alleged "realistic" outlook they called romantic indology fantastic and without an insight into the "true" factors of social life. From them we have heard the astounding news, that in ancient India as well, men were not ethereal beings, living on the nectar of fruits alone, as the people of the Kritayuga are supposed to have done, but that they ate solid foods and hated, cheated and at time even killed each other. I think this was also known to the romanticists, but it was not important for them. Their interest was not focussed on what was common to all peoples—hatred, fraud and war, what regrettedly was and remains common to all people—but on the distinguishing features, that constitute a particular "Volkgeist" or national spirit. In the documents of an ancient India, the Rigveda, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, they found the reflection of a true, unspoiled state of mankind still in harmony with the supernatural powers, and this discovery does not become untrue by their totally neglecting the darker sides of the picture, by their entire lack of interest in the economical and political factors of ancient Indian life and the scantiness of the

reliable information at their disposal. As one-sided as it might be, it will remain one of the great discoveries in the history of mankind. All of us know that the second half of the 19th century brought a thorough change. An immense wealth of new facts became known about India, many of them not at all fitting into the former picture of a Wonderland, and to gain mastery over them, a new critical method was developed, which was to replace the enthusiasm of the preceding generation. This does not mean that the German indologists did not love India any longer; no, it became a private matter with them, supposed to be non-compatible with the sober science of philology, whereas the romanticists' enthusiasm had been an inseparable part of their aims and methods.

For us as well as for later generations, it will always be refreshing to see how Max Mueller has kept up his love and enthusiasm for India till the end of his life. Throughout his lectures a youthful vigour is felt, which gives us the impression of their being delivered by a young man and not by a dignified elder professor. In the seclusion of his Oxford residence, which had become a place of pilgrimage for Indians travelling to England, he was, far from Germany, far from India, and somehow, also far from England. Here he was given the chance to develop a style of communication with India quite personal and entirely his own. It may be true that his deep love for India hardly could have grown and developed in this way without an imperfect knowledge of reality; yet its purity and honesty cannot but impress even the modern reader and make him forget the innumerable shortcomings of his writings or his repeating of things, that have been said many times before. This might seem little from a purely scholarly point of view. But scholarship is only a part of human culture, and it becomes a tiny and worthless part, when it is based solely on intellectual curiosity void of the inspiration of a higher goal. A genuine modernization of indology cannot be brought about by undue stress on economical and political facts, nor by uncritically adopting methods and conceptions developed from and for cultural types other than Indian. It cannot again become a part of the general education and will remain the hobby of a few outsiders as long as the grand achievements of modern philological and historical methods are not supported by a new mental attitude worthy of the lofty object to be studied.

To Max Mueller this kind of synthesis, which is still a hope for the times to come, was denied. He felt a deep sympathy for India, Indians and Indian culture, and as a true disciple of the

romantic school, he was not ashamed to imbue his writings with it. Nevertheless, his intellectual arguing was not adequate for the task, and quite often we get the impression, that he tried to prove truth in an unconvincing way, as in his rather naive attempt to defend the character of the Hindus by quoting select passages from memoirs of the Indian Civil Service and epic tales, in which the heroes prefer death to telling a lie. Sometimes he must, himself, have felt that his love for India was platonic both in the elevated and in the meaner sense of the word, as is betrayed by his well-known remark to Keshub Chunder Sen, that he preferred to stay in "his own Benares", namely his study at Oxford, for fear of the sight of the "real Benares".

This is what a European scholar of the 20th century might have to say about Max Mueller. In India there was no tradition of splitting a person in two halves, each of which has to be judged by its own standard; thus, there was no readiness to distinguish the philologist Max Mueller and the man Max Mueller. This was all the more so the case, as the problems of late 19th century indology, pertaining to various readings and the presumptive dates of alleged interpolations in certain manuscripts, could raise but little interest in the minds of Indian people. What counted for them was the fact, that between a colonialism engaged in the suppression of the beginning of the struggle for independence and an indology of merely academic ambitions, a single man had raised his voice against current prejudices and tried to fill as many people as possible with enthusiasm for Sanskrit and the holy writings composed in it. For the Westerner Max Mueller may definitely belong to the past, but to the people of India he must have appeared as a hope for the future, an auspice of a true understanding of India and her ancient culture.